

Women Progress Through Periyar's Journal

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ABSTRACT

A galaxy of social reformers and a few reform-minded elites emerged in the Nineteenth Century, to remove societal obstacles that stood in the way of women's liberation and development. Of all the reformers, Periyar E.V.Ramasamy (E.V.R.) alone attacked, for the first time, the ideological basis of the "enslavement of women" in society through his journals. Periyar considered his journals as powerful vehicles to spread his message to the Tamil Society. In 1925, he started a journal, *Kudi Arasu*, (People's Rule) which was followed in 1928 by *Revolt*. Then he started a Tamil journal called, *Puratchi*. It was then replaced by *Pagutharivu*, (Rationalism), on 26 August 1934. He made quick substitutions of each banned journal. It illustrated the importance he attributed to printed media because journals regularly carried his social and political reform ideas to the nook and corner of Tamil Nadu. As a matter of fact, till the end of his active public life, E.V.R. continued the floating of new propaganda journals. He started *Unmai* (Truth) in 1970 and *Modern Rationalist* in 1971, both when he was extremely old. In all his journals, Periyar paid much attention to the emancipation of women and elevation of the Depressed Classes.

KEYWORD: Women Liberation, Kudi Arasu, Puratchi, Property Rights, Self-Respect Marriage, Women Rights, Widow- Remarriage.

INTRODUCTION

Periyar E.V.R. worked for the cause of women during his seven decades of public service with a well disciplined supporters and followers. His journals and organisations came

to his defence against vituperative attacks and brickbats. It is a well known fact that to retrieve the "marginalized section"(women) of the society from the "dominant culture" E.V.R took up the cause of women as his life mission right from the day when he entered the public service. Through propaganda tour and platform speeches and through the social organizations like Self - Respect Movement and Dravidar Kazhagam E.V.R.courageously met the forces of orthodoxy and reactionaries.

PERIYAR E.V. RAMASAMY [1879-1973]

E.V. Ramasamy Periyar, humanitarian thinker a fighter for social justice. As he happened to reside in Tamil society, it was quite natural for him to take on all the social ills which were prevalent during his time. He was very keen in ensuring that caste-based discrimination was rooted out of society and in ensuring that a sense of equity pervades the society cutting across the male-female gender disparity and the tendency to treat women as slaves. Ironically enough, there are very few people who had studied and completely understood Periyar's reformist thoughts.

BACKDROP IN WHICH 'KUDI ARASU' WAS LAUNCHED

The worst shame in world history is untouchability which was strictly followed in the hamlet named *Vaikom* coming under the then *Tiruvudangur* (Travancore) Province under the British India where in the so-called 'low-caste' people were not allowed to use the roads surrounding the popular Mahadeva Temple. T.K. Madhavan, a Congress leader and a disciple of Sri Narayana Guru, came forward to challenge this practice/custom at a time when very few dared to protest against this disparity. He launched a huge protest on 30.3.1924. Protesters were arrested and put behind bars. Mahatma Gandhi and Sri Narayana Guru had lent their support to the protest.

Thousands of people were arrested even as the non-violent protesters were brutally attacked by the police under the British regime. It was at that time that the Kerala Congress Party sought help from Periyar, who was a prominent leader of the Congress Party in Tamil Nadu. Periyar responded to the call and visited Vaikom along with his female family members. Involving himself, his family seriously in the protest, he woke up people from a deep slumber as he instigated them to stand-up against the unacceptable social evil of untouchability.

The protest became deep-rooted as Periyar was arrested and lodged at the *Tiruvidangur* Central Prison. Print media in Kerala and the rest of the country, sans Tamil Nadu, covered Periyar's Vaikom protest prominently. The protest finally came to an end in 1925. This happens to be the first-ever successful non-violent protest held in a huge manner in the country. The protesters later awarded the title of '*Vaikom Warrior*' to E.V.R. Periyar.

The Vaikom struggle seeking social justice to the under-privileged sections of the society went by and large unnoticed in Tamil Nadu with only one or two journals reporting about the protests. When he was arrested by the police of Chennai Provincial Government, he was quick to find out that the press was supporting the Govt. and that it was consciously blocking news about non-Brahmins from appearing in print. This made him realize the significance of launching his own journal. Thus Kudi Arasu born.

OBJECTIVE OF LAUNCHING KUDI ARASU

Six months after the launch of Kudi Arasu, the editorial of its issue dated 01.11.1925 said "It's been six months since the journal was launched; the journal should contribute to implement Mahatma Gandhi's dream of 'Swaraj Nirman' and for the liberation of non-Brahmins and the so-called untouchables paving way for them to lead a life of self-respect. That would be the real Swaraj (self-rule) where everybody is treated and lives equally and the oppressed classes are retrieved their due space in society." Thus, this provides ample proof of Kudi Arasu's primary objective.

Periyar stood for a gender equal egalitarian society. There are articles and debates on women's right, women's property, child marriage, equal status of women cadres, appropriate conjugality, birth control, education, and employment, women in politics, gender equality and justice for women in all walks of human life and activities. All the inequalities among genders are manmade to retain his superiority in society. Kudi Arasu proclaimed this in its issue dated 22.08.1926. "People with wisdom would agree to the fact that the Almighty didn't create the irregularities among men and women; except for their physiques, how can anyone find a difference in the courage or knowledge of men and women? This is almost impossible. Both men and women comprise geniuses and great courage-filled souls as well as cowards and idiots." At this period Periyar was not an atheist. This magazine was a tool to bring out a change in the mindset of people.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Periyar had expressed his views particularly on women emancipation and other subjects against the traditional views of this county. Only limited scholars researched on his views and simply termed him as radical feminist. Periyar's feminist views are also welcomed by some scholars. Pasu. Gowthaman (2017) observes that 'we should say that the important reason for the historical success of the conceptions of Periyar is that he had understood the Indian conditions very minutely. N.Muthumohan (2017) in his epilogue of a book contains Periyar's writings says, "Periyar had defined the concept of women's liberation after taking into consideration of the social conditions and he further states that the denial of orthodoxy is the actual emancipation of women".

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The Kop man's theory of collective action frame is used in this analysis. As per researches these theory operates in three stages from preparing the readers for the media text, and to take media text into field of action. They operate with three variables namely diagnostic, prognostic and motivational. Diagnostic frame is the frame in which the problem and the reason for the problem are constructed. Prognostic frame is the frame in which the solution for the above said problem, the ways to reach that solution and the plans are put forward with the tactics of prediction. Likewise, Motivational frame is the frame in which the appeal is made for the field work to establish the self-identity.

PROPERTY RIGHTS

E.V.R. emphasized the need once again in his editorial in Kudi Arasu in December, 1929 thus;"Like men", the women should have property rights and like women, the men should have all virtues and good character and laws enforcing these should be made without any delay.¹ Then Kudi Arasu wrote that E.V.R's followers set an example to others by adhering to the ideology of the Self- Respect Movement. E.V.R. praised highly a bridegroom who in his marriage held in September 1939 at Nagercoil registered a property worth of Rs.5000/- in the bride's name.²

While detailing some of the rules and regulations for the conduct of Self Respect marriages, E.V.R wrote in Puratchi in June 1934 thus: "As per the old marriage system the women did not have the right to property. They did not have equal rights with men in the family, whereas the Self- Respect marriages are based on the recognition of equal rights of

women in owning or inheriting property and also in sharing rights equally with men in running the family".³

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

E.V.R did a lot for the women's rights. He said that each woman should learn an appropriate profession for herself. He strongly viewed that at present women in India experience much worse suffering and humiliation and wanted such slavish situation should go. He floated the idea that adorning women with costly dress and jewels is not better than giving them education, knowledge and self-respect.

E.V.R. considered the women's craze for ornaments in any way could not elevate their condition in the society; instead it would bring them in danger. Its results, E.V.R. listed, were self-pride, vanity, domestic quarrels and insecurity. He called upon women to throwaway their golden flatters and be emancipated.⁴

SELF-RESPECT MARRIAGE

In a leading article of Viduthalai, Periyar states that a self-respect wedding is based on rationalism. Rationalism is based on the individual's courage. Some may have the courage to conduct it during the time which almanacs indicate as the time of the planet Rahu and that, particularly in the evening. Some others may have just enough daring to avoid the Brahmin priest and his mother tongue - the Sanskrit language.⁵

Periyar then asks why the government can't pass an Act that legalizes weddings which avoid superstitious practices. Marriages styled as Self-Respect marriages carried a threefold significance: a) replacing the Purohit, b) inter-caste equality, c) man-woman equality. Self-Respect marriages were legalized in 1967 by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) Government.⁶

MARRIAGE

E.V.R was vehement while saying that I do not accept the words 'Wedding' or 'Marriage'. I term it only as a contract for companionship in life. For such a contract, it is enough a proof of registration. The other marriage ceremonies meant that waste of mental effort, time, money, enthusiasm and energy. According to him, a wedding should be contracted only on the principle of equality of the sex and equality of treatment.

WOMEN'S FREEDOM

E.V.R found out the reason behind the statement that "Man can live without woman, but a woman cannot live without man". According to him because of the problems of child bearing, women are unable to demonstrate that they can live without men. As men have no such burden, they are so placed as to declare that they can live without women. Besides, the problems of maternity make women seek the help of others and this gives rise to male domination. Therefore, for true emancipation of women, they should be completely freed from the bothersome obligation of child bearing.⁷

WIDOW'S REMARRIAGE

E.V.R. also reformed and modernized several aspects of marriage. The reforms of E. V.R. have helped to improve the quality of life of women in general. He emphatically supported the rights of women to divorce when they could not get along with their husbands. Divorce was not allowed in the past according to the laws of the land. He argued: "At present women have no right to seek divorce; when the husband is alive, no woman has the right to marry another man. While this is the case with woman, the law allows a man to marry another woman while the first wife is alive."

Also he strongly condemned polygamy. In this regard, Kudi Arasu revealed that he cited the practice of the Namboodiri, among whom the eldest son alone can marry any number of Namboodiri girls while all the other younger brothers can keep the Nair girls as concubines. The children born to the concubines have no right over to the father's property. This practice keeps the Namboodri old man with six or seven wives.⁸

PERIYAR E. V. R 'S VIEWS ON WOMEN EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Periyar always viewed that for the emancipation women there is a need for creating equal opportunities for women to get their education. According to Periyar, women themselves should come out of the bond of slavery, without the support of any men, provided that if they were given the opportunity of getting their education. He strongly viewed that as there is a reservation system existing for the socially backward sections of the people, there must be fifty percent of reservation should be provided for women in education and employment. He further insisted that in the entire government ministry, women were to be included equally as ministers. Periyar gave more importance to women child for education than the education for the male child. According to Periyar, if a man was given the

opportunity He used to say that if there are two children in a family, i.e., one male child and another female child, if that family is able to provide education for only one child, that opportunity for getting education should be given only to the female child.⁹

Periyar E.V.R further opined that if a male person is supposed to get education, that education will be helped him to develop his personality and also will be helped him to increase his financial position, but at the same time if a female child is given the opportunity of getting education, that educational knowledge will definitely helped her not only to develop her economic position but also will be helpful for the society, to solve many of the existing social evils.

Thus Periyar in his life Mission utilized the journals of him to ventilate his assertive views on the Women liberation even though many of his journals were banned by the British Government for his extreme political views.¹⁰

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